

# *Acts of distinction at times of crisis: an epistemological challenge to intercultural communication research*

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# Acts of distinction at times of crisis: an epistemological challenge to intercultural communication research

Zhu Hua , Rodney H. Jones  and Sylvia Jaworska 

## ABSTRACT

In this article, we reflect on the epistemological frameworks and priorities of intercultural communication research regarding ‘cultural differences’. With the current challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the growing political and social polarisation in recent years, we argue for a need to (re)focus attention to the ways acts of distinction (i. e., the explicit marking and accentuating of cultural differences) function in everyday encounters. The notion of acts of distinction, supported with principles from interactional sociolinguistics and moment analysis, can further our understanding of the dynamics of domination and the symbolic dimensions of group formation.

本文回顾了关于“文化差异”和群体关系的跨文化交流研究的理论框架和研究重点。鉴于当前 COVID-19 流行病毒带来的挑战，以及当前政治和社会日益严重的两极分化，我们认为需要（重新）关注人们“分化行为”，即强调和明确划分文化差异的行为。“分化”概念结合交流社会语言学和时刻分析的原则可以帮助我们了解群体的支配和被支配关系以及群体形成的象征维度。

## KEYWORDS

Acts of distinction; symbolic power; symbolic violence; cultural differences; domination

## Introduction

As part of this special issue marking the 20th anniversary of the *Language and Intercultural Communication* (LAIC) journal, this article is our attempt to understand the politics of ‘cultural differences’ in the context of the social, political and racial polarisation that has characterised the past few years (e.g. O’Donohue & Carothers, 2019) and has been further exasperated by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Hansen & Gray, 2020). This focus on ‘cultural differences’ is partly inspired by our project on the experiences of Chinese international students in the UK who found themselves being ‘quarantined between cultures’ during the 2019/2020 academic year when the pandemic created severe restrictions on travel, and medical experts, politicians and ordinary citizens were embroiled in disputes about how best to handle the crisis. As we tried to understand the challenges Chinese students in the UK were facing during that period, and the impact of their experiences on their relationships with the people around them as well as their friends and family members back in China, we observed how frequently the notions of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural differences’ (particularly around health behaviours such as wearing face masks) were brought up in conversations, and how they functioned discursively as explanatory and interactional resources, used by participants to help them make sense of what was happening to them and to manage their communication with others. Observing the depth with which our participants seemed to experience ‘culture’ and ‘cultural differences’, alongside the apparent fluidity of these concepts as they were appropriated and discursively constructed moment

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by moment to respond to various interactional challenges, spurred us to reflect on the various ways scholars of language and intercultural communication over the years have conceptualised, challenged and reconceptualised ‘cultural differences’ in their academic research, and how these (re)conceptualisations compare with the ways ordinary people think of ‘culture’ and what they ‘do’ with it, especially when faced with situations of unfamiliarity, uncertainty, conflict, and fear such as those experienced by people across the globe in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, including our participants. We argue that in order to understand the complexity of people’s lived experiences with cultural differences and the ways they have contributed to the rise of discrimination, polarisation and tribalism in everyday life, we need to (re)focus our attention on questions of who talks about culture, under what circumstances, and how people strategically deploy notions of culture and interculturality in their day to day interactions as a way to address practical problems and manage their interactions and relationships with others.

In this critical essay, we first provide a critique of the shifts in the epistemological frameworks regarding ‘cultural differences’ in language and intercultural communication research, including recent turns towards concepts such as ‘interculturality’ and ‘transculturality’ which embrace more postmodern, performative and interdiscursive conceptualisations of culture. We then discuss how social actors often establish and accentuate ‘cultural differences’ as a practical means of managing their social identities and interactions with others, and how attention to these ‘acts of distinction’ can help us to understand both the symbolic dimension of group formation and the dynamic and strategic nature of social identities. We draw on examples from Chinese international students’ experience of living and studying in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate the value of the analytical notion of ‘distinction’ in helping us reconcile anti-essentialist, postmodern conceptualisations of culture that dominate in the academy with the ways people *use* the notion of culture in their everyday lives.

### ‘Cultural differences’: shifting epistemologies

For a field founded with the aim of understanding and bridging ‘cultural differences’, it is not surprising to see this notion serve as the starting point for much intercultural communication research. In the early days when the idea of ‘intercultural communication’ was just beginning to be fashionable, the priority of many scholars was discovering and interpreting ‘culture-specific’ patterns of communication and social interaction in the tradition of Edward Hall’s formulation of ‘culture as communication’ (Hall, 1959, p. 186, emphasis ours). This priority has persisted across various contexts including organisational (Hofstede, 1980) and academic cultures (Clyne, 1987) leading to the preoccupation with finding out ‘cultural’ sources for differences observed in the ways in which people talk and write, with culture being mostly defined and interpreted in national terms (e.g. Chek & Sweetnam Evans, 2010; Holtbrügge et al., 2013; Siepmann, 2006; Vassileva, 2001). While ‘the search for cultural differences’ has raised awareness of the range of different ways people conduct communication, the underlying assumptions about ‘culture’ as the source of such differences, and the methodological choices such assumptions engender, have come under intense scrutiny, criticised as ‘essentialist’, ‘reductionist’, and even ‘ethnocentric’ (a term which itself traffics in cultural essentialism) (e.g. Holliday, 2016; Sarangi, 1994). But there are also other concerns, less discussed, but arguably more fundamental to making the field of intercultural communication relevant to addressing problems associated with intergroup cooperation and conflict.

One of these is the underlying *political* nature of notions of ‘difference’ in social life – the fact that talk about ‘cultural differences’ inevitability arises out of and helps to perpetuate power differences. Writing about the use and abuses of South African keywords, Thornton (1988, p. 27) argues that ‘cultural understanding’ should not be regarded as ‘simply a knowledge of differences, but rather an understanding of how and why differences in language, thought, use of materials and behaviours has come about’ and therefore, the focus should be on understanding *meanings, functions* and *histories* of differences rather than using the apparent ‘fact’ of differences to explain history, politics

and beliefs. In this regard, what is important is not just the existence of observable differences, but how difference is created, and the political functions and ramifications of such creations. For example, for Thornton, the perceived differences between the British and the Zulu ‘cultures’ need to be understood (a) as historical products of social stress and warfare in the era of British empire-building; (b) in the context of the increased coherence of both the British and Zulu societies through (forced) contact and the continuum of cultural ideas and practices across the land between Britain and South Africa; and (c) as fossilised through various means of knowledge dissemination dominant in the West, i.e. books. The danger of overlooking the politics of ‘cultural differences’ is well-articulated by Street (1993), who points out how static and essentialist notions of culture can reinforce racial and ethnocentric divides, deflect attention away from power relations (as can be seen in the debates about ‘multiculturalism’ in Europe), trivialise gross political and economic inequalities, and reduce discussions of culture to the fetishisation of things like clothing or food (as in the focus on saris and samosas in UK ‘multicultural education’) (p. 35).

Thornton further warns against the epistemological challenge inherent in talking about ‘culture’: by seeing things through the lens of ‘culture’, we reify and maintain boundaries and differences and by doing so, change the very nature of culture itself. He writes:

One thing that culture does is to create the boundaries of class, ethnicity (identification with a larger historical group), race, gender, neighbourhood, generation, and territory within which we all live. These boundaries come to seem uniquely real and permanent. ... Boundaries are created and maintained when people observe, learn, and finally internalize the rituals and habits of speech, the dispositions and dress of their bodies and modes of thought to the extent that they become entirely automatic and unconscious. (p.27)

The problem with the reification of ‘cultural differences’, then, is not just that it is ‘reductionist’, but also that it can lay the groundwork for acts of ‘symbolic violence’ (see below) such as ‘othering’ – the subordination or exclusion of people based on the discursive production of difference or ‘otherness’. In his discussion of the discursive underpinnings of ‘othering’, Joseph (2013, p. 184) warns that as long as we believe that ‘difference has some absolute, objective character distinct from what is said about it, “othering” is inevitable.’ Jones (2013a), however, argues that it is not just the discursive construction of difference, but the way difference is framed as a matter of what makes ‘us us’ and ‘them them’. The real problem with most accounts of ‘cultural differences’, he says, is not that they acknowledge differences, but that they distil them into simple binary relations.

Observations such as these have inspired a shift in the focus of intercultural communication research from ‘culture *per se*’ or the ‘differences between or among cultures’ to the ways power relations and ideological formations are (re)produced in the interaction between people associated with groups – an orientation broadly referred to as ‘critical intercultural communication’ (e.g. Nakayama & Halualani, 2012; Piller, 2011). This perspective is also evident in the mediated discourse approach to intercultural communication, which seeks to reconstitute the research agenda around social actions and how claims and imputation of group memberships function as mediational means for accomplishing such actions (Scollon et al., 2012; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Finally, it plays a central role in approaches that focus on the situated discursive construction of identities, including group memberships, such as those which use terms such as ‘*interculturality through interaction*’ and ‘*transculturality*’, which we will elaborate on in the next section.

## Interculturality or transculturality?

‘Interculturality through interaction’ emerged as a line of inquiry amid the growing recognition among language and intercultural communication researchers that cultural differences should not be taken as *a priori* or static conditions. It embraces a constructivist paradigm and focuses on joint social activities and their impact on how meaning and social identities are constructed, seeking to understand how participants make aspects of their identities, in particular, cultural identities or memberships such as ‘Chineseness’ or ‘Britishness’, more or less *relevant* in interactions

through the use of various interactional resources. Methodologically, it relies on analytical tools from conversation analysis/ethnomethodology and interactional sociolinguistics and examines interactional practices and sequences of talk to understand what participants *do* with cultural membership, what identities they orient to, align with or resist, and how they ascribe identities to others (for a review, see Zhu, 2014/2019; and also the seminal work by Nishizaka, 1995; Mori, 2003; the special issues by Higgins, 2007; Young & Sercombe, 2010).

*Interculturality through interaction* is part of the movement towards a more dynamic understanding of cultural differences and cultural membership. Recently, there has been some discussion of adopting the prefix ‘trans-’ as in ‘transculturality’ to emphasise the fluidity of cultural identification and communication practices and to capture a sense of moving *through* and *across*, rather than in-between, cultural and linguistic boundaries (Baker, 2021; Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019, p. 473; see also Shafirova et al., 2020). In a wider context, both *interculturality as interaction* and *transculturality* carry the trademarks of postmodern, performative, and interdiscursive approaches to identity and language which have also been inspired by the mobility turn (Sheller & Urry, 2006) in the social sciences. Research from migration studies, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics has highlighted the unprecedented complexity, multiplicity, and inherent contradictions associated with ‘identities in mobility, providing new insights into the questions of whether or to what extent ‘fixed’ identities such as those related to ‘ethnicity’, which have been often equated with ‘cultural’ identities, can be transported, imposed, assumed, or negotiated during processes of migration and in the context of increasing connectivities between places and increasing superdiversity in every corner of the world (Zhu, 2017). The emphasis of such work is on the *agency* of mobile individuals, whether they be transnational workers, international students, or displaced refugees, exercise in negotiating identities. From this perspective, ‘cultural differences’ are not just negotiable; They can also come to constitute *interactional resources* that people draw upon in ‘doing’ identities, such as when they are used to reference certain cultural practices, claim cultural expertise, or index cultural differences.

The idea of transculturality also draws inspiration from the ‘translanguaging turn’ in applied linguistic and sociolinguistic research, which emphasises the multilingual language user’s capacity to create an apparently seamless flow between languages and language varieties and to transcend the boundaries between named languages and/or language varieties as well as the boundaries between language and other semiotic systems. However, the links between transculturality and the social justice and equitable education agendas of translanguaging are yet to be explored (cf. Zhu & Li, 2020).

These ‘inter-’ and ‘trans-’ movements hold promise in helping to break down the perceived boundaries between cultures. Spurred on by this promise, work in these paradigms tends to downplay the significance of cultural differences in favour of notions such as ‘hybridity’ and ‘third space’ (cf. Otsuji & Pennycook’s, 2010 critique of ‘happy hybridity’). At the same time, there is tension between this emphasis on hybridity and dynamism and everyday situations where boundaries, differences and group membership seem to be ‘solid’ and essential parts of people’s lived experiences. What we know from the postcolonial research is that while essentialized notions of language and culture often result in ‘othering’, marginalisation and boundary drawing, people can also use them strategically for boundary crossing and liberation. ‘Strategic essentialism’ (Spivak, 1985/1996), referring to people’s tactics of temporarily ‘essentialising’ themselves in order to achieve certain goals, in fact, has been an important starting point for the political projects of many racialised and minoritised groups including feminists, the LGBTQ+ community, and indigenous people all over the world (see e.g. Jones, 2007; Sylvain, 2014). Studies have found that migrants also make use of ‘strategic essentialism’ in order to establish in-group solidarity and maintain a shared, localised group identity (Ladegaard & Cheng, 2014; Reyes, 2004; Sierra, 2019) and to challenge the status quo (Zhu & Li, 2020).

The dynamics of strategic essentialism, as Jones (2007) argues, takes place as an ongoing negotiation between processes of people ‘imagining’ cultural identities for themselves and deploying these identities to claim social capital, and others ‘inventing’ cultural identities for them, and



deploying these identities to marginalise or attack them. At the same time, ‘imagination’ and ‘invention’ exist in a symbiotic relationship: The process of imagining a ‘cultural identity’ for oneself which is a central component of ‘identity politics’ *requires* the invention of what Sampson (1993) calls a ‘serviceable other’ – with a ‘cultural identity’ different from one’s own.

While strategic essentialism celebrates individual and group agency, there are other occasions when identities and differences, rather than being ‘imagined’ by individuals and groups themselves, are ‘invented’ and imposed on people by governments, institutions, peer groups or ‘cultural opponents’. As Jones (2013a, p. 2) remarks, ‘To say that culture is “socially constructed” does not make it any less real for those who find themselves living within the confines of its material manifestation in laws, borders, passports, language tests, prisons, clinics, and classrooms.’

The COVID-19 pandemic provides many poignant examples of this process. In the early days of the crisis, references to COVID-19 as the ‘China/Chinese virus’ or ‘Kung Flu’, sometimes by powerful politicians, led to the rise of discrimination against the Chinese people in some countries. In the UK, with the increase of infections at the start of the academic year of 2020–21, university students were singled out as ‘irresponsible’ and ‘reckless’ and blamed for spreading the virus. Fences were built around a student hall of residence overnight in a Russell Group University (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/nov/05/security-fence-manchester-university-student-flats>) – the poster, ‘students are not criminals’, on the windows of the student accommodation captured the resentment and frustration of those locked inside.

The pandemic and the growing political polarisation of the past five years have served to make these processes of marking and accentuating cultural differences even more salient, challenging scholars of intercultural communication to (re)focus their attention on the dynamics of cultural polarisation, to seek to understand how *hard* boundaries between different groups are drawn, how cultural differences are discursively constructed and deployed in concrete social situations, and the consequences these dynamics have on interpersonal and intercultural relationships. In the remainder of this paper we will argue that Bourdieu’s notions of distinction, symbolic power and symbolic violence provide useful tools for understanding the politics of cultural differences, especially in times of polarisation and crisis.

### Acts of distinction at times of crisis

The notion of *distinction* is the central focus of Bourdieu’s work on the relationships between class and cultural taste. In illustrating how people’s judgements about or preference for food, music, visual art, as well as their reading habits and media consumption are dominated by the tastes of the upper class, he uses the term ‘distinction’ to describe concrete practices of recognising, legitimatising and approving differences (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991). In other words, distinction is not just about differences between groups, but about how ideas about difference become seen as legitimate and widely accepted and how differences are underlined and subsequently employed to yield ‘profit in distinction’. This profit could involve maintaining a particular social order or ‘a profit in legitimacy’ (1984, p. 228) and as such distinction constitutes an instrument of symbolic domination.

This kind of symbolic domination takes the form of symbolic power or symbolic violence, another two key concepts in Bourdieu’s work that are of particular relevance to the impact of distinction on group formation. For Bourdieu (1991), symbolic power is a type of power that is arbitrary and can be ‘exercised only if it is recognised, that is, misrecognised as arbitrary’ (p.170). It is exercised ‘with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it’ (p.164), and ‘defined in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it’ (p.170). The difference between Bourdieu’s ‘symbolic power’ and power as used in everyday life and the research literature is well explained in Kramsch (2016). Symbolic power is not something that some people have and others don’t. Nor is it simply about one group dominating another. Rather, it is about how power becomes legitimate and recognised by those who are subject to it and how this kind of domination is embedded in our



everyday practices through symbolic systems and forms. ‘It is,’ Kramsch writes (2016, p. 524), ‘a principle constitutive of social life, a way of structuring reality, of classifying, controlling, and disciplining knowledge as well as people’s bodies and thoughts.’

Bourdieu (1991) sees language, and by extension, discourse, as playing a central role in symbolic power. Zhu and Kramsch (2016) elaborate on the various forms that symbolic power can take in conversations, such as the power to play with signifiers that activate distinction, the power to reframe interactions from convivial exchanges to displays of who owns the language and vice-versa, the power to position one’s profession along the public/private distinction, the power to manipulate the social context of the encounter to gain recognition and to challenge misrecognition, the power to gain a profit of distinction, and finally, the power to exploit power relations through strategic misunderstandings (Kramsch, 2016). In all the cases, despite its different forms, symbolic power is invisible but perceived by all; diffuse and exercised by all through the complicity of all; relational; coercive; self-perpetuating yet seemingly natural, neutral and beneficial. Kramsch (2021) provides further insights into the working of language as symbolic power in educational, social, cultural and political contexts.

To capture the effect of symbolic power on people’s perceptions and beliefs and the dynamics of group formation, Bourdieu offers the term *symbolic violence*. For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is ‘a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition, recognition, or even feeling)’ (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 2). As Thapar-Björkert et al. (2016, p. 148) put it, ‘symbolic violence is less a product of direct coercion, and more a product of when those who are dominated stop questioning existing power relations, as they perceive the world and the state of affairs in a social activity as natural, a given and unchangeable.’ One form of symbolic violence, according to Swartz (2013, p. 39), is ‘everyday classification, labels, meanings, and categorizations that subtly implement a social as well as symbolic logic of inclusion and exclusion.’ Such classifications, as Hacking (1999, p. 31) points out ‘do not exist only in the empty space of language, but in institutions, practices [and] material interactions with other people.’

Symbolic violence can also be exercised over individuals through ‘everyday social habits’ and therefore can occur ‘through mundane process and practices of everyday life’. Thapar-Björkert et al. (2016, p. 149) make the point that the ‘elementary’ domination, ‘made, unmade, and remade in and by the interactions between persons’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 184) needs to be understood along with the domination of particular institutions and discourses ‘that may seem to be neutral, apolitical and impartial, but are in fact intersected by particular forms of racialised/ethnicised, gendered, classed power relations and structures’.

In the context of the COVID 19 crisis, we have seen how differences between groups are underlined to gain profits in distinction and how symbolic violence occurs through mundane process and interactions. We will elaborate these in the next section.

### Lived experience of acts of distinction: to wear or not to wear face masks

We will draw examples from our project to illustrate how health behaviours such as wearing face masks have become a site of acts of distinction that result in symbolic violence. To contextualise the examples, we provide some brief information about the project we conducted. The project sets out to investigate Chinese international students’ experience of being ‘quarantined between cultures’ in the UK during the pandemic. We were primarily interested in exploring how Chinese students negotiated cultural differences in health behaviours and coped with COVID-19 related stigma, and how all of this influenced their relationships and attitudes towards living and studying in the UK. The focus on Chinese students was motivated by two facts: Chinese students comprise the UK’s largest proportion of international students, and they were disproportionately affected by COVID-19 stigma especially during the first months of the pandemic (Hansen & Gray, 2020). Our methodology followed a community-based participatory framework (Banks et al., 2013). We

recruited five participant-researchers from the community of Chinese students in the UK from different universities, subject areas and degree levels (BA, MA and PhD) and worked alongside them on data collection and analysis. The team also engaged about 80 Chinese students as participants from across UK and also China. We used a range of qualitative methods including one to one and group on-line interviews; diaries in which our participant-researchers recorded their everyday life experiences in the UK during the pandemic; visual data through which our participant-researchers document their experience in the pandemic; and media texts collected by the participants about the pandemic. The main areas of challenge these students were facing were identified as wellbeing, discrimination, study, logistics, and information and communication. Here we will focus on their experiences of discrimination and how they coped with it.

When the novel coronavirus was first reported in China, Chinese students in the UK had to contend with simultaneously worrying about their friends and family members back home and realising that their ethnicity had suddenly become a maker of potential infection. The most common examples of othering and discrimination in our data were associated with the wearing of face masks. In the early days of the lockdown in the UK, in an effort to deal with shortages of personal protective equipment for medical workers, ‘experts’ were mobilised to promote the message that face masks are not necessary, one of the arguments being that they would give people false confidence and thereby make them more vulnerable to infection. However, face mask wearing is a very common practice in East Asia where due to past experiences of pandemics facemasks are generally believed to be important tools in preventing virus transmission. Not surprisingly, then, at the outbreak of COVID-19, many Chinese international students in the UK started wearing them. Yet, this health practice, associated by those who engaged in it with acting responsibly, was subjected to symbolic violence by individuals, institutions and authority figures who occupy dominant positions through the formation of acts of distinction that ‘subtly implement[ed] a social as well as symbolic logic of inclusion and exclusion’ (Swartz, 2013, p. 39) and thereby maintain and reproduce social inequality.

On some occasions, distinction and domination are grounded in supposed adherence to scientific evidence and communication needs. In one incident reported by our interviewees, a professor asked a Chinese student to take her mask off in class, explaining to her that ‘there is no research so far that shows wearing a mask works. So please take it off. I need to see everyone’s face clearly’. The professor presented his health belief and his ‘pedagogical’ need to see his students’ faces as normal – who would argue against him if science is on his side? The student, in this case, was put on the spot. In order to be considered a legitimate, rational and ‘good’ student who believes in science and follows the professor’s instructions, she had to take an action contrary to her health beliefs. This is an example of how symbolic violence is exercised in interactions through the manipulation of symbolic meanings of science and pedagogy.

Symbolic violence can also take place at organisational level. At the same university the vice-chancellor was compelled to announce that mask wearing by some students should be tolerated because it was part of some students’ ‘culture’. Framing health behaviour as ‘culture’ rather than science is, in fact, another way of delegitimizing and denaturalising it. The implied symbolic logic of inclusion and exclusion in this case is subtle but definitive: the culture which needs to be tolerated must be inferior or backward. These acts of distinction interacted with the changing discourse on face mask wearing in the UK government’s policy. Later in the pandemic, the government was compelled to use ‘science’ (the same rationale) to make the case for *enforcing* the wearing of face masks as part of its COVID-19 prevention measures, though masks were euphemised as ‘face coverings’. Over the course of the pandemic, the status of masks as a marker of ethnic otherness waned, with authorities gradually conceding to the idea that masks are beneficial. Mask wearing was no longer considered a ‘cultural practice’, but a matter of science, and in some cases a matter of law. Ironically, as we prepare the first draft of this article, the UK government had taken another U-turn on face masks. In England, from 19 July 2021, face coverings were no longer required by law, although the Government said it still ‘expects and recommends’ them in crowded and enclosed

spaces, and some transport operators and supermarkets have asked customers to keep wearing masks. Jones' (2021) review of the three functions of face masks (things that conceal, things that protect and things that transform) and their historical social contexts is a timely reminder of how a health practice can be social-culturally and historically conditioned. What we have seen in the U-turns of the UK government position and *the fact that they get away with it* is an example of symbolic violence exercised by authorities that control and discipline knowledge as well as people's bodies and thoughts.

Acts of distinction around illness and health behaviour are not new. Practices of 'othering' and stigmatisation, in fact, have been part and parcel of pandemics going back to the Black Death, and such practices almost always reflect deeper political or social contradictions rooted in particular societies. Jones (2013b) notes that during the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and 90s, gay men and people of colour were stigmatised as vectors of infection in the West, while in Asia and Africa heterosexuals (particularly female sex workers) and Westerners were blamed. One function of such othering is to give to people a sense of 'imaginary protection' (Mendes-Leite, 1998) against disease in the face of fear and uncertainty. The result, however, is usually that they become even more vulnerable. Jones (2007), for example, found that Chinese gay men in the 1990s resisted using condoms to protect themselves against HIV because they associated them with 'Western promiscuity', believing the authoritative discourse that 'traditional Chinese values' were a more effective protection. At the end of the day, however, 'culture' rarely protects against viruses as well as condoms or, in the case of COVID-19, facemasks.

### Dynamics of acts of distinction in interactions

While often originating with authorities and institutions, acts of distinction and symbolic violence are 'made, unmade, and remade in and by the interactions between persons' in mundane processes and practices of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 184). In understanding how this process of making, unmaking and remaking in interactions, we have found helpful principles from interactional sociolinguistics (e.g. positioning theory, Davies & Harré, 1990) and moment analysis (Li, 2011) and the thinking behind the *interculturality through interaction* research paradigm. Positioning theory, for instance, demonstrates how distinction can be made in the context of 'cultural storylines' within which people position themselves and others as certain kinds of 'characters' through deploying discursive resources that invoke those storylines. Moment analysis foregrounds the importance of 'spontaneous, impromptu, and momentary actions and performances of the individual' (Li, 2011, p. 1224). Bolden (2014) talks about 'intercultural moments' as noticeable points in interactions when cultural and linguistic differences between people become manifest, and sees attention to such moments as part of an interactionally sensitive, emic view of intercultural communication. Similarly, Zhu et al. (2019) demonstrate the analytical benefits in understanding fleeting and seemingly mundane moments in encounters in which participants negotiate and orient to differences spontaneously while collaborating to achieve their goals in institutional encounters. The focus on everyday practices through moment analysis helps us to understand how domination plays out in interactions with the complicity of those involved.

The utility of these frameworks is highlighted by a conversation related to us by one of the participant-researchers in our study. It took place in the kitchen in a student accommodation in London shared by our participant, who is an international student from China, and two other international Chinese students and two local British students. The participant reported that while the flat mates generally got on well and supported one another during the lockdown, and in fact she was very appreciative of this supportive atmosphere, there was an episode of a heated debate when they started talking about the policies of their respective countries regarding lockdowns and social distancing measures. This is how the participant reproduced the conversation in her diary.

- [Context: a kitchen in a university student accommodation in London; Wen, Lily and Rei: international Chinese students; Aidan: local British student; our participant-researcher: present, but does not take part in the conversation; the conversation is reported in the diary by the participant-researcher]
- Wen: But at least people are trying, we cannot do nothing and watch people die!
- Aidan: But what about the economy? If we lock down and everybody is unemployed, it will be a disaster for everyone. We've had the first lockdown and now it comes again.
- Lily: It's because the first lockdown here is not effective at all. You are not strict with the rules.
- Aidan: We can't be like Wuhan.
- Lily: It's not only Wuhan, the whole country was locked down.
- Aidan: But you know a lot more people died in Wuhan, right?
- Wen: How do you know that? Were you there?
- Rei: Maybe we should stop this conversation for the sake of our friendship.
- (Diary Week 10, Pos. 46–52)

In this episode, both sides try to deploy and to resist, acts of distinction, or, in the parlance of positioning theory, to position themselves and others (and resist others' attempts at positioning) against the backdrop of various political, economic and 'cultural' storylines. Each individual is positioned as a spokesperson for their government and 'culture', using the pronouns YOU and WE not to refer to one another as individuals, but to refer to governments and countries. Each side tries to control and discipline what counts as 'knowledge' when it comes to public health, claiming various forms of expertise and challenging the evidentiary basis of the claims made by the opposing side. Each side also tries to reframe the interaction in the game of (mis)recognition: in the second half of the conversation, Aidan refers to Wuhan as an extreme example of the lockdown policy, but Lily quickly changes it back to the thrust of the discussion, i.e. the need for a strict lockdown; in the next couple of turns, Aidan tries to bring up the question of the alleged cover-up in Wuhan, which was then subsequently challenged by Wen. What we see in this example is the dynamics of acts of distinction in everyday mundane interactions, where individuals speak from the 'imagined' positions of their collective identities and make arguments based on collective positions they have 'invented' for others. What we also see, however, is a certain self-consciousness about these dynamics, and a willingness to 'pull back' ('Maybe we should stop this conversation for the sake of our friendship') to avoid interpersonal relationships from being swallowed up by cultural storylines. Such moments of 'pulling back' are just as important, if not more important, for scholars of intercultural communication to analyse as are moments of 'othering' and 'conflict'. We should direct our attention not just towards identifying the conditions that give rise to acts of distinction, but how these acts can also create conditions that give rise to moments of awareness where space is opened up for people to question how boundaries are being drawn and whether or not they are worth it.

## Conclusion

Language and intercultural communication as a field of study has experienced several epistemological shifts, from its early searches for 'cultural differences' to its later questioning of who makes 'cultural differences' 'real', and its still later to embrace of perspectives like interculturality and transculturality that resist essentialized notions of culture. In the context of the present historical moment, however, we argue for a need to (re)focus attention on the complex way acts of distinction mark and accentuate cultural differences, i.e. how they can be used by institutions and individuals to exercise symbolic violence in everyday life to mobilise populations, resist marginalisation, claim social capital and how they can also create moments for reflection and awareness as well as possibilities for moving away from differences and othering in the name of friendship and sociability. The notion of 'acts of distinction', supported with principles from interactional sociolinguistics and moment analysis, can help us understand the dynamics of domination in vivo and the way that distinction is imposed, resisted and negotiated in situated social interactions. This (re)focusing

revives the projects of scholars such as Thornton (1988), Street (1993) and Scollon and Scollon (2001) who urged us not to try to define what culture is, but what people do with culture and how they do it. Now more than ever, understanding how people engage in ‘acts of distinction’ should be a priority for scholars in intercultural communication if we are to respond to the rise of tribalism and nativism.

Ultimately the problem with acts of distinction is not difference itself. Differences do exist in the way different groups of people behave around issues like, for instance, health and illness. What acts of distinction do, however, is to make certain observed differences criterial, turning them into tools for drawing boundaries and making value judgements. A more useful response to difference is made possible by moments of recognition like the one in the conversation above where people ‘pull back’ from the trap of distinction and regard difference not as a basis for drawing boundaries but as a site of authentic exchange or encounter with the other (Levinas, 2005).

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